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Celebrating life through Food: A Study of Mita Kapur's The F- Word" studies the genre of women writing about their lives through food.

Abstract: In the recent past food studies has drawn much interest from scholars in different disciplines of life. Food is much more than a nourishing substance that sustains life. But it is an indicator of one's social, economic, religious, cultural and geographic identity. Food discourses function at different levels in writing. The symbolic significance of food is crucial as it is linked with religious ceremonies and traditional practices. Traditionally in most homes, the kitchen is a peripheral space allotted for women. This is a highly gender codified space and women have over the years, attempted to render a semblance of power to it. This paper titled "Celebrating life through Food: A Study of Mita Kapur's The F- Word" studies the genre of women writing about their lives through food.

Key Words: Food, Kitchen, Culture, Periphery, Cookbook

"Celebrating life through Food: A Study of Mita Kapur's The F- Word"

'... For food is the chief, of things, of all things, that come to be...'

-Taittiriya Upanishad, valli 2, anuvaka (3)

For centuries women have used food to inform others about their lives. They do so through cookbooks, memoirs, journals, recipes, novels and letters. Some of the early writings record recipes, remedies and interesting anecdotes. Jill Fouston in her introduction to the edited volume of *The Virago Book of Food: The Joy of Eating* states that the earliest version of the household book in English is from the Middle Ages. She enlightens us that in the past one of the significant sources of information of the lives of women came from the "household book" (2) which recorded personal anecdotes and experiences with interesting recipes.

It is interesting that these cookbooks, manuscripts informed the reader about the culture, life, tradition of the people through the recipes. My paper titled "Celebrating Life through Food: A Study of Mita Kapur's *The F-Word*" will focus on three issues, firstly how the writer uses food and recipes to tell us 'herstory', secondly how she infuses local history into her work through food, the personal stories and history are woven together in the text. Finally, my paper will also address the concerns of the modern woman with her role in the kitchen.

In most societies, preparing and processing and serving of food is usually done by women only. In some cases, producing and purchasing of food too. The kitchen is a space designated for women in patriarchal families and the power of decision making, preparing, apportioning and serving food rests on the women. In most parts of India, the power the ladle wields is substantial. In joint households, where many women live, the power holder is the one who runs the kitchen. Kitchen chores are considered to be tedious, thankless, unpaid labour and the ritualisation of cooking, serving, sharing and fasting can lead to enforcement of stereotyped gender roles. Thus, food helps to define the place of women in family. But the kitchen space also enforces positive ideas such as family bonding, mother-daughter relationship, creativity, the role of women in food and economics and recipes help tell 'herstory'.

The recipe is the representation of food through the written text. Today food historians treat recipes as historical documents and are analysing them closely. The relationship between

women and food is significant. When we normally think of cooking, we think of it as a chore of women. Different cultures look at cooking differently. In the Indian context, the woman being the Annapoorni, the Goddess of nourishment is strongly etched in our minds. Our ancient texts on Ayurveda discuss food in relation to good health, prosperity, well-being, and as a tradition building and sustaining mechanism and so on.

Kapur opens her introduction of the book thus, “When I decided to write this book, I wanted to write about food, not just cooking. To me food and more good food has always been symbolic of a celebration of life”. (ix) Thus, at the outset itself she justifies her reason for writing about food. The narrative is thus cleverly woven with recipes, interesting episodes from her life and fascinating characters. The writer uses food trope to revive old memories of her childhood and youth, about her culture and tradition. By presenting recipes at important stages of her life, the writer is stringing a pattern of life history.

In the opening chapter Kapur, enlightens the reader about of an old army tradition, of a having drink before dinner. While discussing starters with her daughter Sakshi, the writer forays into kebab territory. We are enlightened on the tradition and history of kebab making. She says that the Turkish koftas or meat patties transformed into delicious kebabs in India after the Muslim infiltration. The word kebab is of Mesopotamian origin and ‘kababu’ means to burn or char. The Mughals and the Nawabs of Awadh changed the kebab into a culinary masterpiece with their distinct flavouring and spices. This history of kebab is narrated through her personal account of a visit to Lucknow for a wedding. As Kapur is engrossed in a conversation with Ali, the chief cook, for whom ‘...cooking is as sacred as his religion. It is not about eating, it is a philosophy’. (8) To emphasise on this notion, she narrates the anecdote of a certain eighteenth century chef who was so upset that when the nawab did not taste his dal poured it on a dead tree. The tree is said have sprouted fresh, green leaves. Thus

we notice that the humble dal can take the avatar of a culinary art. Kapur further compares the subtly flavoured Lucknowi kebab with the Hyderabadi version which is heavily spiced. During this journey into the world of kebabs she highlights the anecdote on the discovery of Kakori kebab to suit the palate of a British officer. As the writer gives detailed report on the various versions of kebabs, she also introduces her family to us. We meet Sakshi, her adolescent daughter who questions the very idea of a fish kebab and the starter being served as a main dish, her sister Nita, a fine cook observing whom the writer got drawn into the culinary art, and Aman,, her nephew, a food connoisseur.

Most cookbooks consist of more than just recipes. These books are handed down from mother to daughter and seldom handed out of the family. In contrast, most traditional chefs and cooks were men and the recipes were handed over to the sons as a trade secret. Cookbooks update the reader about the availability of ingredients, history of a particular cuisine, the culture of the local people, the food habits of the community and the food history of the place. Therefore, they are a rich reservoir of pertinent information about people, their cuisine, eating habits, topography of the place, the climatic conditions that favour the growth and availability of ingredients, and the socio-religious practices that impact the food habits and cuisine of the culture concerned. Thus, it is can be observed that just as any form of art, food culture is a significant part of every tradition and it represents the heritage of that region. Kapur opines that, ‘...a cuisine is more than a sum of its parts. It indigenizes foreign influences, adapts to seasonal variations and of course, shapes itself according to geographical conditions.’ (28) She observes that satay; a version of the kebab was introduced by Arab traders to Java. A similar understanding can be drawn from Attia Hosain in her essay ‘Of Memories and Meals’ where she reminisces on the Lucknowi Kebab. During her sojourn abroad, she calls the kebab maker a culinary artist.

Yet another interesting anecdote from the writer's life is her first exposure to the voracious appetite of her Punjabi husband's family. She shares with the reader the initial difficulty in adjusting to a new culture, cooking methods and cuisine. She confides in the reader her struggle of cooking large quantities of oily, spicy food. Kapur's late uncle ran a successful restaurant at Jaipur and it is through him she reveals the history of her family. He tells her that they hailed from a family of landowners from Punjab's Jhelum district; after a brief stint as a manager of a hotel in Delhi her uncle relocated to Jaipur to start Niro's in 1949. The restaurant boasted of loyal clientele from the maharajas of Udaipur to the local people.

Kapur writes about her youth through food. She describes the Sunday ritual of meat and roti lunch as a young girl. Her grandmother was a strict vegetarian and much to the alarm of the family, she would often spring on them with surprise visits. The children in the family soon got used to this and would quickly rush into the kitchen to eat hurriedly. Once the elderly lady was fed and fast asleep, they would continue their non-vegetarian lunch in the sly. She narrates a humorous incident during their courtship days, when she tested her now husband's love for her by serving him a burnt piece of chocolate cake who ate it up without complaint. Kapur and her husband were regular visitors of Jai Mahal, a popular restaurant during their courtship days for the privacy it offered. The couple were waited upon by Narendra Rathore, the present head steward. It is interesting that Mita Kapur taught him a few tricks of the trade. Rathore was also a witness to every celebration in the family.

When Kapur threads the pattern of her life story and the local history through food, we notice that she is emphasising on the significance of a much-neglected art form which is the culinary art. She is apprising the reader on the effort, creativity, time sense, economics and the sheer joy involved in the less recognised culinary art. When most of the master chefs around the world are men, the daily routine of cooking and feeding the family rests with the woman whose efforts are unpaid and unrecognised labour. Through her book she acknowledges the

fact that this knowledge and creativity that women possess is noteworthy. As Certeau And Luce Giard observe, “With their high degree of ritualization and their strong affective investment, culinary activities are for many women of all ages a place of happiness, pleasure and discovery”. (Certeau and Giard 67) The writers also opine that culinary art needs the wisdom, imagination and recall of any other supposedly superior art form such as music and tapestry.

The concluding part of this paper addresses the modern woman’s approach to the kitchen space, cooking and feeding the family. Kapur’s book enlightens the reader about relationship between obesity and fast food, the significance of healthy cooking and eating. Kapur informs the reader that the need to serve nutritious meals cannot be overlooked. This she performs by substituting soya chunks for red meat and by using less ghee and oil. The writer also throws open the debate of emotional binging. Her daughter Sakshi is an overweight teenager who loves food. The writer reveals that most often there are emotional issues attached to over eating. Much to the writer’s dismay Sakshi informs her that she was physically abused as a child. Though Sakshi has never shared this dark secret with her mother, she copes with difficult situations by binging on food. As Sakshi prepares to go abroad for higher education she turns to food for comfort. The girl is uneasy about her appearance and therefore expresses hatred towards the opposite sex. Kapur instils the value of healthy eating in her daughter and hopes for a change. Being well aware of the expected reaction from an adolescent, Kapur informs her daughter on her difficulty in buying fashionable clothes. Interestingly the attention is on looking good and being in sync with the current trends in fashion than on healthy eating. As a mother she fears that her well-endowed daughter might be treated unkindly by her peers.

In the recent past, we have been bombarded with commercials that focus on the fast food industry and it is ironical that advertisements that promote the fast food industry are viewed

alongside campaigns on healthy eating habits. Society expects the mother to ensure that the children are fed nutritious food. But today with better availability of fast food, affordability and with the culture of eating out on the rise, the onus of ensuring the health of the family members is often on the woman. In her analysis of the change in the American eating habits Alice Julier Observes that “The food industry creates three times as many food products as we as a society need and spends billions of dollars selling endless variety and constructing new needs when none existed before. :” (Julier 488) We are also aware that obese people are often scrutinised and, various reasons are charted out such as laid back lifestyle, stress, lack of sleep, exercise, overeating, unhealthy food and so on. There are major businesses that thrive on creating slimming products and a large workforce is employed by the health, grooming and beauty industries to make people thin. Given this situation Kapur’s anxiety of her daughter binging on chips and her nephew’s fondness for pizzas is thought provoking.

It is significant that using the trope of food, Kapur celebrates life in the F-Word, by weaving ‘her story’ with history. Since traditionally, the kitchen space is considered the women’s sphere and is deliberated to be limited when compared to that of the space of men, even women historians were hesitant to record the importance of the kitchen. Kapur vividly informs us of her life and local history through food. She also defines the modern woman’s ideas of cooking and serving food. The Indian woman of today has challenged certain accepted notions of how and where to cook food, when, what and whom to feed and most importantly when to feed herself. Given the fact that the writer represents the upper strata of society, her story may not be that of other women whose experiences will be different. But I would like place my hopes on the words of Shashi Deshpande, ‘...Annapurna still stands firm. No longer on the pedestal, perhaps, but on the ground. And may be, she can now lay down her ladle whenever she gets tired. After all being a goddess can be very tiring.’ (Deshpande 219)

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